
Government of the District of Columbia



**Office of the Deputy Mayor for
Public Safety and Justice**

Testimony of
Edward D. Reiskin
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice

***Public Hearing on PR 16-683, “Director of the Office of
Unified Communications E. Michael Latessa
Confirmation Resolution of 2006”***

Committee on the Judiciary
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

April 24, 2006

Room 500
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
10:00 A.M.

Good morning Chairperson Mendelson, members of the Committee on the Judiciary, staff, and guests. I am Edward Reiskin, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. The text of my remarks this morning are also available on my website at <http://dmps.jdc.gov>. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Mike Latessa's confirmation as director of the Office of Unified Communications.

Mr. Chairman, as you well know from your chairmanship of this committee as well as your previous chairmanship of the Subcommittee on Public Interest, 911 operations in the District have improved dramatically over the last several years. I want to thank you for your support and oversight during this period as we worked hard to correct many of the fundamental problems in our emergency communications technology, infrastructure, and operations. To truly appreciate how far we've come in the wholesale restructuring of this critical government service – including bringing in Mike Latessa to lead the OUC – I want to add a little historical perspective.

In the late 1990s, the District's 911 system was unstable at best and in dangerously poor condition. Outdated technology, run-down facilities, and a disjointed system between the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department (Fire/EMS) all hindered system efficiency. At the same time, the number of calls to 911 and the 311 non-emergency number were on the rise, driven in part by the proliferation of cell phones. Although we laid the foundation for change with the co-location of police and Fire/EMS communications at the Public Safety Communications Center (PSCC), as recently as 2003 residents were continuing to experience "queue" or hold time, or even getting busy signals, when they called 911 or 311. Frustrated with slow call-answer times, too many residents who called 311 for non-emergencies were hanging up and calling 911 instead – undermining the purpose of 311 and leading to more pressures on 911.

The Mayor tapped Mr. Latessa in 2004 to be director of the PSCC. Before coming to DC, Mr. Latessa was the first director of Norwalk, Connecticut's joint communications center. Mr. Latessa's 30-year public safety career, which began as a dispatcher, firefighter, and paramedic, served him well when the Mayor figuratively thrust him into the driver's seat of a speeding car and asked him to fix it.

In government we frequently talk about the challenges of managing an agency in transition and there is hardly a better example of this than the Office of Unified Communications. When the OUC was established,¹ Mr. Latessa was given the awesome responsibility of consolidating three separate organizations – each with its own culture and unique challenges – into a single, streamlined agency with admittedly inadequate resources and virtually no management structure to support him – and to complete the transition ahead of schedule – all while meeting the public's need for uninterrupted emergency and non-emergency services in the Nation's Capital. In short, the Mayor asked Mr. Latessa to turn around the District's 911 operations and the Mayor and I give him credit for doing that and more.

¹ The Fiscal Year 2005 Budget Support Act of 2004 (Title III, Subtitle B) transferred the authority, responsibilities, duties, and functions of the call centers and radio technologies from MPD, Fire/EMS, and the Office of Customer Service Operations to the newly-established OUC.

As the interim director of the OUC since the agency opened its doors in October 2004,² Mr. Latessa has been the single point of agency-level management accountability for the performance of the 911, 311, and 727-1000 system. Although Mr. Latessa will go into greater detail on the agency's performance, I want to mention several noteworthy improvements. Under Mr. Latessa's leadership, the OUC now answers over 96% of all calls to 911 in five seconds or less. Early in FY03, that figure hit a low of 56%. Today, the number of 911 calls that are abandoned is less than 3%, down from a high of approximately 23% just a few years ago.

We have more call takers now than ever before and more of them speak multiple languages to match Washington's growing population of residents with linguistic diversity. The OUC now has more than 37 Universal Call Takers (UCTs) capable of answering all emergency calls including police, fire, and medical calls saving an average of 21-23 seconds of talk and transfer time. The OUC has reduced absenteeism and the casual use of sick leave by over 40% between 2005 and 2006. And more than three-quarters of the operations staff are on 12-hour shifts.

Yet, perhaps the most important improvements to the agency brought by Mr. Latessa have been to resolve long-standing, seemingly intractable issues. As part of the agency's restructuring, OUC worked with DCOP to reclassify every single position at OUC, creating parity between the former police and fire/EMS sides of the house while raising pay grades and salaries. An important outcome of this process has been the development of a career ladder for OUC employees to promote retention and career development within the agency. And this year the leave-without-pay impact on retirement calculations has finally been resolved. To build on these breakthroughs, OUC welcomed Mr. José Guiterrez as the new Deputy Director for Human Capital. Mr. Gutierrez returns to the DC government from the federal government and brings with him decades of experience in public sector labor relations.

Agency advances including organizational restructuring, business processes reengineering, end to end call tracking, and quality assurance are important to note, but at the end of the day what matters most to residents and visitors alike is that the police show up – or fire/EMS personnel show up – when they call 911. We are focused now more than ever on this core mission because these long standing issues are behind us.

Let me conclude by stating that the credit for this change does not only belong to Mr. Latessa – call takers and dispatchers are the unsung heroes of first response. In times of crisis, we praise the police officer and firefighter who arrive on the scene to save us from danger because they are visible, but too often we forget the calm voices of the call taker and dispatcher who deliver those services under pressure.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of Mike Latessa, the Mayor's nominee for director of the Office of Unified Communications. I am available now to answer the Committee's questions.

² Mayor's Order 2004-170